



## DISCIPLESHIP MATERIAL

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**Lesson Number:** Six

**Theme:** Jesus The Son of Man

**Date:** October 2021

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### Introduction

We begin a new set of series about Jesus and some of the designations he used about himself while on his earthly mission. We start off with Jesus referring to himself as the Son of man. This was quite a common title or designation he used about himself in the gospel. What does this mean and what was the purpose for this? We use this material, today's lesson and the related series following, to establish, using evidence from Scripture itself, reasons why Jesus used such title. In the end, this should clear doubts about his person and the nature of his assignment here on earth.

#### A. Why is Jesus called “Son of man”?

There are different schools of thought on this subject and we take a look at the prevailing ones. The common understanding is that “Son of man” implies his humanity. Jesus was a son of man, that is, a human being. He was born of a virgin. He had a human father but he didn't have sexual relations with this virgin until Jesus was conceived. He was conceived of the Holy Spirit in the virgin Mary. Thus he is human-fully human and therefore the designation.

Another school of thought argues it differently. This school also argues that Jesus was not the only one to have been called by that designation. The evidence is from the many instances from the Old Testament where the term is used for other people. Several texts from the Bible are used to support this claim with the counter claim that even the term “Son of God”, from Scripture, does not necessarily imply a divine nature and thus same idea applies to “Son of man”.

Yet another school of thought attempts to draw parallels between Jesus and the ministry of Prophet Ezekiel considering the fact that the title is used more in Ezekiel than in the gospels. There are some striking resemblances as well between Ezekiel and Jesus which solidifies this belief.

We take these different schools of thought and examine their claims<sup>1</sup>. This exercise is to help us keep up with the current understanding and help us explore the subject further on our own.

## **School One: The Highly Exalted One**

A popular school of thought dwells on the humanity of Jesus for his use of the self-designation. According to this school, it is God's way of emphasizing to us that Jesus is fully human. Why this was important we look at it later. But a more sophisticated and important historical insight is that the term "Son of man" doesn't merely align him with humanity, it also reveals Jesus indirect Old Testament reference to himself. In Daniel 7:13 we read this: "*I saw in the night visions, and, behold, one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him.*" This school believes it is quite probable that Jesus directly quotes from this. In the entire chapter of Daniel 7 one can see that the Son of man is a very exalted figure: not just a human figure but an exalted figure. It was Jesus' favourite self-designation.

If a study of the term "Son of man" in the gospel is done, one does see that Jesus did not refer to himself most often as Son of God but as Son of man. As a matter of fact the only time He accepted the title of the Son of God was when the high priest pushed him to declare it. On the other hand he said things like, in Mark 10:45, "*For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.*"

This school therefore argues that Jesus was very subtle in his speeches in that he was always opening his identity to those with *eyes to see*, but he wasn't opening it so blatantly that everybody would come and make him king. There are several instances in the gospel Jesus refused to be crowned a king (Mark 10:37, John 6:15) because a lot of people, including his disciples, at the time misinterpreted his earthly mission. Jesus had expected them to know him through Scripture but unfortunately it was not the case. In his ministry he had to steer a very narrow course in disclosing his identity, not just openly saying, "I'm the Messiah, I'm the King of the World. Come and acknowledge me as King." He didn't talk like that. He left his followers to decide whether his claims were true or not.

He was quiet. He was subtle. And he would make claims that were explicit in certain settings and implicit in others. And only when the time was right—mainly when he was on trial for his life before the high priest, and they said, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the living God?"—did he say, "I am, and you will see the Son of man coming with great power and glory" (Mark 14:62). So he confessed his open deity right at the point where he knew he would be crucified for it.

And so from this we realise that "Son of man" has the double meaning of human being and, according to Daniel 7, exalted heavenly one. And, from this school of thought, Jesus means to communicate both of those.

It's also noteworthy that the from this vision of Daniel 7 the "Son of man" receives dominion specifically over the kingdoms which were shown to Daniel as beasts: a lion, a bear, a leopard, and a dragon. The scene recalls Adam's original mandate to rule over the beasts of the earth. Daniel's son of man is one who is fulfilling the commission to Adam to "rule" as the image of God. This is precisely Jesus' role: The last Adam, the faithful Israelite, the chief representative of the saints, the perfect image of God, the one who inherits the kingdoms of the world and subdues the creation. That's what it means for Jesus to be the son of man. He is the son of Adam in the fullest sense. The second son who receives the inheritance in preference to the first son – like Isaac, like Jacob.

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<sup>1</sup>Some ideas here were taken from <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/why-is-jesus-called-son-of-man> and <https://knowingscripture.com/articles/why-is-jesus-called-the-son-of-man>

## Questions for Discussion

- (1) Why did Jesus speak in parables and had to hide his Deity?

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- (2) Why would you agree with this school of thought?

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### School Two: Only a Generic Title

This school of thought argues against the former on the premise that (1) “Son of man” is what Jesus called himself during his earthly ministry, during which time no one had trouble believing that he was human. (2) It doesn’t make much biblical sense to construe the contrast between “son of man” and “son of God” as equivalent to that between “human” and “divine.” This is because plenty of regular old humans (not to mention angels) are called “sons of God”: Adam, kings of Judah, Christians, the fallen angels of Genesis 6, etc.

The argument is that as a mere title, “Son of God” does *not* necessarily imply a divine nature. To be *God the Son*, the second person of the Trinity, is more than to be simply a *son of God*. In the same way, we should not think that “son of man” is simply or primarily a way of speaking about Jesus’ humanity. Accordingly, this school argues that if we want to understand what Jesus really meant by it, we should look at how the title “son of man” was used in Jesus’ Scripture, the Old Testament. So here are some basic observations about how the title is used:

- (1) The title “son of man” appears several times in the Old Testament as a way of highlighting weakness. In Job 16:21; 25:6; and 35:8 it appears to have that connotation, and also in Isaiah 51:12. Similarly, in Numbers 23:19, the God who does not lie or repent is contrasted with the “son of man” who does both.
- (2) There is one occasion in Isaiah (56:2) and two in Jeremiah (50:40; 51:43) where the term doesn’t really appear to imply weakness particularly, but to simply be a euphemism for human. A handful of uses in the Psalms fall into these two categories.
- (3) There is another occasion in the Psalms where the title is used in a context that implies not weakness but strength: Psalm 80:16-18 says this:

It is burned with fire, it is cut down: they perish at the rebuke of thy countenance.  
Let thy hand be upon the man of thy right hand, upon the son of man whom thou  
madest strong for thyself.  
So will not we go back from thee: quicken us, and we will call upon thy name.

In Psalm 8:4-8 as well, even though the psalmist marvels that the God who made the heavens has regard for the “son of man,” he recognizes that God has crowned the son of man with glory and honor, and set him over all God’s works. So “son of man” can refer to a powerful or at least an honored person. It’s worth noting as well, with Psalm 8 brought into the picture, that the Hebrew term is *ben-adam*, son of “Adam”—which is the generic word for “mankind” or “human,” but points to the original man Adam of whom every human is a son or daughter.

And so these three categories of use, according to this school of thought, leave us with the understanding that “son of man” as a generic title can highlight the frailty of mankind in contrast with God, but it can also be used to conjure up the recollection of humanity’s high status as the image of God and ruler of creation. It’s a title that is capable of both humbling and exalting, as the case may require.

## Questions for Discussion

- (1) What do you think is the main thrust of this school of thought?

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- (2) Does the title “son of man” really refers to others apart from Jesus based on this school?

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## School Three: Prophet Ezekiel & Jesus

According to this school of thought, Ezekiel is called “son of man” more frequently than Jesus is in all four gospels *combined* (93 times for Ezekiel vs. 82 times for Jesus in the gospels). Prophet Daniel also, even after seeing the exalted “son of man” in chapter 7 is himself referred to by the same in the chapter that follows (Daniel 8:17). Jesus’ own use of the term is often connected with statements about his “coming with the clouds of heaven,” so Daniel (chapter 7) serves as the most promising immediate background. But the sheer volume of usage in Ezekiel suggests that we should not ignore that either, especially considering that Ezekiel and Daniel were near contemporaries (at the time of the captivity in Babylon) with Daniel being a bit younger and in all likelihood perfectly familiar with the fact that Ezekiel had been known as “son of man.” When Daniel saw “one like a son of man,” *perhaps* he meant “one like Ezekiel.” And so according to this school, it is possible that Daniel alludes here to Ezekiel. If so, it would be to Ezekiel as representative of a faithful remnant, because in Daniel’s vision the “son of man” is later equated with “the saints of the most high” (Daniel 7:27).

Ezekiel, the son of man, was appointed as a prophet to Israel, at thirty years old, by a river, like Jesus. Here is his commission (Ezekiel 2:2-5):

And the spirit entered into me when he spake unto me, and set me upon my feet, that I heard him that spake unto me.

And he said unto me, Son of man, I send thee to the children of Israel, to a rebellious nation that hath rebelled against me: they and their fathers have transgressed against me, even unto this very day.

For they are impudent children and stiffhearted. I do send thee unto them; and thou shalt say unto them, Thus saith the Lord God.

And they, whether they will hear, or whether they will forbear, (for they are a rebellious house,) yet shall know that there hath been a prophet among them.

Jesus, the Son of man and the greater Ezekiel, was like Ezekiel and the other prophets sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. He spoke to them only what he heard from the Father. In Ezekiel 8:6, the prophet saw abominations in the temple:

Son of man, do you see what they are doing, the great abominations that the house of Israel are committing here, to drive me far from my sanctuary?

Jesus also saw abominations in the temple, and drove them out with a whip of cords (Matthew 21:12-17, John 2:13-22).

Jesus spoke in parables so that Israel in their rebellion wouldn't understand him. Ezekiel, too, was a speaker of parables (17:2). Ezekiel announced the destruction of Jerusalem (9:1-11), as did Jesus in the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24:1 – 25:46). Ezekiel even *symbolically* bore Israel's punishment (4:4-8), which Jesus would do in reality. And there are more similarities than these. Of course, one can find plenty of similar parallels between Jesus and Jeremiah, etc. So this point probably shouldn't be pressed too much but worth the study all the same.

## Questions for Discussion

- (1) What other similarities do you know between the ministry of Prophet Ezekiel and that of Jesus?

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- (2) Would you say this is convincing enough?

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## B. Son of man in the Gospels

One other point before looking at the gospels. "Son of man" is a title used almost entirely by Jesus himself to refer to himself. After the gospels, *it disappears completely*. It did not pass into normal Christian usage or worship. Stephen did see "the Son of man" standing at the right hand of God (Acts 7:54-60). In the Revelation also it appears twice: the son of man is standing in the midst of the lampstands (Revelation 1:13), and is seated on a cloud with a sickle in his hand (Revelation 14:14). But that's it. This fact has to be significant. Is there something about the specific context of Jesus' ministry that makes the title uniquely appropriate for that time period?

There is no particular gospel in which the title dominates. It appears 29 times in Matthew, 14 times in Mark, 26 times in Luke, and 13 times in John. This reflects the gospels' respective lengths more than anything else.

If time is taken to skim the lists of references in each of the gospels above, something that will strike the reader is that there doesn't seem to be any particular association between the title "son of man" and any one aspect of Jesus' ministry or teaching. It's just what he calls himself. It's his way of saying "I" or "me"—whether he is talking about his miracles, preaching, his impending death, kingdom-bringing power, authority to forgive sin, or his lordship of the Sabbath. So, why would he call himself that? In light of all this background, that Jesus' self-reference as "son of man" is owing primarily to two considerations:

- The similarity of his ministry to Ezekiel's.

- Jesus as the fulfillment of Daniel’s vision, as the one who receives and rules over the kingdom of God.

By the way, this is also important evidence that the gospels (including the supposedly late and mythologized John) record Jesus as he actually spoke. Liberal scholars have often thought that Jesus’ words in the gospels are simply early church theology put into Jesus’ mouth. But if that were the case, why would they have Jesus continually call himself something that he is never called in other Christian writing? The only reason why the gospels would record Jesus calling himself something that the church did not go on to call him is that he really called himself that.

## Questions for Discussion

- (1) What strikes you the most about this title of Jesus?

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- (2) What other investigation are you going to yet explore because of this study?

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